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Tuning In and Dropping Out
An American Tradition

In the 1960s, many of the so-called hippies of the era heeded the call of their self-styled guru, Timothy Leary, to "turn on, tune in, and drop out" by literally dropping out of mainstream society, which they regarded as corrupt and imperfect, to enter into communes. Such communities would be, at least in their minds, free from corruption and imperfection—utopian social experiments that would shine like beacons for the rest of the world to follow.

Well, they might not have expressed the intent of their communes in exactly those terms; but many, if not most, of the participants in this flight from the mainstream did believe that their communities would serve as microcosms of the perfect society. More importantly, they believed that what they were doing was something novel and unique.

The reality is that the endeavor to at least "tune in and drop out" is a cherished American tradition. The roots of this movement date back to the years following the discovery of the New World, when observers in Europe became infatuated with the possibilities offered by the new land, referring to it as the "New Eden." Sir Thomas More, in fact, believed that before the fall of man, all the world had been America. Elements of this Messianic expectation could be seen in the ideology of the Puritans, who sailed to the shores of Massachusetts Bay with the conviction that they were founding the New Jerusalem, a city upon a hill which would shine like a beacon for all the world to follow.

This conviction spawned a number of utopian social experiments in the United States. Their founders and participants believed that they could create a microcosmic model of the "perfect society," a society whose characteristics would be emulated ultimately in the larger society.

What appears on the pages that follow is an exploration of the history, preservation, and interpretation of a small number of the hundreds of utopian or intentional communities that dotted the American landscape throughout its history. The history of these communities is as diverse and unique as the effort to preserve and interpret them. Some of the communities studied here were strictly sectarian in nature, such as those run by the Shakers, the Moravians, and the Christian Communists who, under the leadership of John Humphrey Noyes, settled the Oneida community (the Oneida Community Mansion House was designated as a National Historic Landmark [NHL] on June 23, 1965).

Other communities were essentially secular in origin, such as that established by the New England Transcendentalists who attempted to set up a self-sustaining community at Brook Farm in Massachusetts (1841-1847; designated as an NHL on June 23, 1965) where it was hoped that intellectual pursuits would be balanced with the manual labor necessary to perpetuate the farming community. Likewise, the Utopian Socialists who, under the influence of Robert Owen, founded the Utopian Socialist Community of New Harmony, Indiana (the New Harmony Historic District was designated as an NHL on June 23, 1965).

It should be noted that while a great deal of emphasis is usually given to those intentional communities that emerged during the Jacksonian period of American history, contemporary scholarship has shown that the drive to create intentional/utopian communities was continuous and quite prolific during the post-Jacksonian period.* Members of the Communal Studies Association have been striving to identify and catalog this vast treasure trove of offbeat Americana. But much remains to be done. Hence, if anything, it is hoped that this special issue of *CRM* will stimulate efforts to identify, register, preserve, and interpret resources associated with, as expressed by one of the contributors to this issue, groups outside the cultural mainstream.

Note

* See, for example, Robert S. Fogarty, "American Communes, 1865-1914" *Journal of American Studies* 9 (August 1975) 146-62, and Timothy Miller, American Communes, 1860- 1960: A Bibliography (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

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